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Harry needs to keep calm, carry on

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Body

In conversation with a student at a multi-faith reception during the Duke and Duchess of Sussex's 10-day South Africa tour, Prince Harry reportedly confessed to being so "overwhelmed" by the world's problems that he sometimes struggles to get out of bed in the morning. He is particularly afflicted by eco-anxiety.

Harry's climate-change alarm is honestly come by from Prince Charles, a lifelong eco-warrior who told Commonwealth foreign ministers in July that the next 18 months would "decide our ability to keep climate change to survivable levels." Charles became a leader in the organic-food movement to concretize his commitment to a brighter future. Harry has in turn launched Travalyst, an initiative conceived to promote sustainable tourism. He has also pledged to have a "maximum" of two children.

The "green prince" has nevertheless been charged with hypocrisy and double standards. His own Yeti-size private-jet carbon footprint does him no eco-honour. And having "only" two children is not the hardship none would be. The no-sacrifice optics point more to privilege than sincerity.

In truth, what irritates me most about Harry is his public confession of his fears. He seems to be channelling Swedish teen climate activist Greta Thunberg, whose terror of an imminent climate apocalypse has us all mesmerized. Greta hopes her own dread is contagious. As she said in her recent UN speech: "I don't want you to be hopeful. I want you to panic. I want you to feel the fear I feel every day."

I don't believe infecting an entire generation of young people - or anyone - with terror is helpful in a perceived crisis, because panic tends to repress our cognitive function, the very thing most needed. But Greta Thunberg is a private individual expressing personal opinions, not a supra-political national avatar. When a prince expresses fear - well, that's royal over-sharing.

When I was young, the great Cold War fear was MAD - mutually assured destruction by the U.S. and Soviet Russia. Our fear was not based in theory, or on the predictions of demonstrably unreliable computer models, but on the hard realities of actual nuclear weapons and terrifyingly tested science. It would not have been helpful to my teen self or any of her millions of British subjects in the 1950s to hear young Queen Elizabeth whining about her struggles to get out of bed from fear of nuclear war.

In tense times, monarchs and their progeny have one supreme obligation, and that is to hold it together: to remain - publicly anyway - firmly knitted when others are unravelling, to keep their cool when others are losing theirs, to embody hope when all seems hopeless. That's why they get paid the big bucks, and, moreover, why they can be sure their own charming view out the palace window will never be marred by a gigantic thrumming windmill.

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Amongst Harry's ancestors are royals who, being human, stumbled and acted out in stupid or unethical ways. But on the whole, the monarchy as an institution has proved a durable and unifying institution in Commonwealth life, and more often than not, a model of strength and courage when the chips are down.

During the Blitz of the Second World War, as older Canadians well remember, our queen's parents were urged to evacuate Princesses Elizabeth and Margaret to safer terrain, but chose not to take the Foreign Office's advice, lest such a precaution sap national morale. The queen stated, "The children will not leave unless I do. I shall not leave unless their father does, and the king will not leave the country in any circumstances, whatever."

And circumstances were indeed perilous. In a close personal call on Sept 13, 1940, the queen heard the "unmistakable whirr of a German plane" and then the "scream of a bomb," exploding in the palace quadrangle. Yet, only hours later, she and King George VI were visiting London's bombed East End with smiles and a cheering word to raise the spirits of the residents.

I daresay there were mornings during those grim times, with the outcome unknowable and a state of inner alarm quite justifiable, when the royals struggled to get out of bed. Yet get out of bed they did, and with alacrity, because they had the job of their lives to do, and nobody else could do it for them.

In 1939, preparing for war, the British government created the motivational poster, "Keep Calm and Carry On." The words resonated with the national psyche, and encouraged a helpful collective stoicism to face the gathering storm. Though a "stiff upper lip" is in this therapeutic age treated more with irony than respect by us proles, keeping calm and carrying on in a crisis should remain the guiding principle for royals.

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/ Prince Harry;

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